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New director!

The composer Trond Reinholdtsen on the Norwegian Opra, the crisis of contemporary music and his work with Vinge / Müller in conversation with Harry Lehmann and Christine Wahl

From Harry Lehmann, Christine Wahl and Trond Reinholdtsen

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Mr. Reinholdtsen, you are working on the future music! They develop large-format philosophical opera projects in which the music is recorded entirely with virtual instruments. In April you come to the Tonlagen Festival in Dresden-Hellerau. What will you show there?

It is about a strange, mystical group of losers and outcasts from the rag proletariat, the precariat and the *deplorables*. They call themselves „The followers of Ø“ and become their affirmative agitprop oratorio „To the weapons! To the weapons!“ perform. For the (few) among you who do not know the background: „The followers of Ø“ are hyper-enthusiastic and sometimes somewhat radicalized spectators, who very often watch my YouTube film series „Ø“ and try to interpret it.

Part of this „Ø“ series was to be experienced at the Munich Biennale, the festival for new music theater, in 2018: Troll-like beings with construction foam heads sang key sentences from philosophy with great fervor.

The protagonists of the „Ø“ films have voluntarily and completely isolated themselves from the bureaucracy, the decadence, the digital noise and the whole idea of an „outside“. They call it „the system“ and barricaded themselves in front of him in a remote Swedish village in the basement. There they plan „The Event“, a mystical action of a changing magnitude. Unfortunately, their preparatory research, their philosophical and political

considerations, their methodical experiments in art and alchemy have reached a centripetal, semi-incestuous dead end; your „project“ has lost a little in theory.

And the fans of the „Ø“ films – the „followers of Ø“ who are now coming to the pitch festival – are more practical?

DISPLAY



Yes, you want to carry the message from „ Ø “ directly into the world. They want the concrete action and start their missionary-militant guerrilla propaganda tour in Dresden-Hellerau.

As a composer of Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller, you are a well-known stranger to the Berlin theater scene. For „ John Gabriel Borkman “ (2011) and the „ 12-Spartenhaus “ (2013) in the Prater of the Volksbühne and the „ National Theater Reinickendorf “ <TAG composed and created the sound, but also sung all the voices themselves. How did the collaboration with Vinge and Müller come about?

The famous composer Lars Petter Hagen brought us together; he thought that might go well. Vegard and Ida had just released a rather small production of Ibsen's „ Nora “ in an off-timber in Oslo, which proved to be a classic scandal success and was the topic of conversation within the artist scene. I didn't see the performance myself because it was never publicly advertised and I wasn't in the internet jungle loop. But the rumors said that Vegard and Ida fired all the actors three days before the premiere and decided to play all the roles themselves. So I had heard of them and we quickly realized that we were enthusiastic about many things in the same way.

Which one?

The opera is one thing, the film history and the Berlin Volksbühne are two more. In our first joint production – „ Ghosts “ in Oslo –, however, we fought quite a bit. One of the actors was firmly convinced that we would never work together again. At that time I still defended my modernist roots and at some point insisted on using a rather complex, dark gray contemporary music; a muddy sound mass that depressed all actors. But since I felt that it represented an aesthetic truth, I couldn't give in. Another time I freaked out because Vegard asked to use „ Gabriel's Oboe “, the super cheesy leitmotif from the film „ The Mission “ – the ultimate example of shallow „ contemporary classical music “. He wanted it for some scene; probably the one in which the entire ensemble tries to throw herring at each other in slow motion.

How did the argument go?

It was a brutal lesson for me about the energies and effects of the theater compared to the concert hall. In the end I had to admit that Vegard and Ida were always right. The „structural hearing“ that Adorno spoke of unfortunately has no real place in the theater. Now I want to use „Gabriel's Oboe“ in every scene.

***So mission completed!* But seriously: How do you imagine the division of labor between you, Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller in a twelve-hour total work of art like „John Gabriel Borkman“?**

The division of labor is actually quite traditional; at least as for my role. At that time I had a kind of Hölderlin tower up in the Prater, where I sat alone with my microphone for hours and sang and screamed. Sometimes I composed small things or put together longer sequences. I was completely outside of any social life in production – which corresponds very well to my personality type. Maybe there was no social life – who knows? Late at night I went down to the ground floor stage with my newly created sound files, and there was always some new spectacular scene going on that I had never seen before.

In the productions with Vinge and Müller, each performance was different. There is a rumor that up to 200 hours of material exist for a staging, from which a new process is then put together every evening. How does this work exactly: Do you improvise or is a sequence of scenes from music and sound tracks compiled in advance, which you then play?

Oh dear, I long for the good old days in Oslo, when there was still something like a sequence of scenes – at least for the first four hours! Now it's a mess. Everyone is in constant panic and tries to be prepared for everything. We on the „bridge“, where the sound, video and light people are placed, have developed sophisticated techniques on how to do it, Do not pee for twelve hours and eat without the help of your hands, while at the same time triggering sound files and trying in parallel to decipher the director's next vague instruction.

Unlike most of your colleagues, you do not write classic scores or type notes in a notation program, but compose in the medium of the samples. Is this way of working actually different from that of a pop musician?

In fact, I do both. I could write a long love letter about the concept of the score. From a theater perspective, my relationship with the score tradition may be what actually distinguishes my theatrical methods from those of most other directors. The ultimate medium for the fetish of strict planning is the score. Everything is worked out on an abstract level on the paper – or rather in the computer – . Gestures, light and camera movements have already been composed, brought into a noted time structure and saved as audio instructions, MIDI signals and audio files before I invite others to a project. So I don't need long group processes or motivational discussions with actors. We don't even need samples.

You are talking about the „ concept of the score “, i.e. the score in an expanded sense, a kind of meta-write system. But what if you specifically compose the music for your own opera works?

I usually use techniques other than the meticulous elaboration of a score in the notation: there are silly improvisations, algorithmic programming or sound designs, and the whole thing is still worked on the computer. All episodes of „ Ø “ use MIDI instruments that jump into the orchestra pit for the opera orchestra; it is like insisting on the right, all possibilities of super expensive, to use traditional opera house apparatus. But of course the sampled instruments have a certain cheap kitsch aesthetic, which I also enjoy. Paradoxically, this fake grandeur – you can hear a lot of false tones – can be somehow highly expressive and touching. I have the feeling, that I can go much further into traditional and pathetic opera writing – by composing, for example, purely tonal arias – , if the production techniques and the whole theatrical apparatus have a certain homemade strangeness. I try to construct a kind of Brecht's V-effect that can still manipulate and seduce the audience a bit.

The „ super expensive, traditional opera house apparatus “ that you mentioned leads – straight to your Norwegian Opra as its counter model –. This is not only based on a comprehensive artistic idea, which you formulated in 2009 and which we will talk about in a moment, but also a concrete place.

In the beginning the Norwegian Opra was in my rented living room in Oslo, but in 2015 we moved east; since then it has been located in a forest in Sweden. The focus is on the „ Ø house “, in which all „ Ø “ films were produced. It is gradually transformed into a total stage design and converted into a permanent opera installation.

Nearby we have also bought a barn, another house and above all a large meadow, which we use for land art and on which we started, to build avant-garde concrete architecture. It is said to be an opera city, „ Civitas Solis “, the home of the „ followers of Ø “.

This also includes a press department, which in your case is called „ Theory and Propaganda Department “. There it says that the Norwegian Opra is „ the birth of the opera from the crisis of contemporary music “. What is this crisis?

DISPLAY



To be honest, this is a very boring crisis. Who cares? Maybe a few Germans. And me, of course. It is a real and catastrophic crisis, but also a tiring and redundant one. The bottom line is that contemporary music is in a sad, dark state, and I am unable to really analyze how it came about. Isn't it that the whole scene lacks inventiveness, and has it been since the 1970s? When visual art entered the dematerialization phase and lost its media specificity, the music followed very slowly. There were some exciting outbreaks, but our beloved genre always seems to fall back into a counterrevolutionary position – in the Metternich style.

Can you describe this music-specific conservatism in more detail for us theater scenes?

For me, the contemporary music world is very academic, in the worst sense of the word. There are certain codes and unspoken rules (which is sometimes incorrectly referred to as „craft“). You have to follow them to show that you belong to this system. You can look at a score and immediately see whether the person in question is inside or outside the system of correct contemporary music. But academism is always a sign of fear – fear of the anarchy of invention, novelty and amateurism. That is why we guard contemporary music with super-strong institutions: with academies, festivals, ensembles, orchestras, the concert and the commissioned works. But institutions driven by the logic of fear, always choose the most pragmatic projects and support the works of the least possible resistance.

Indeed: a catastrophic crisis. How does the Norwegian Opra want to get out of there?

The attempt is to question precisely these institutional coordinates, i.e. the infrastructure of production. And, logically, I had to start all by myself: no money, no audience, everything was produced in my living room. The crisis was solved on an existential and personal level, everything else will have to be shown.

According to the „theory and propaganda department“, the Norwegian Opra has a lot in mind: it wants to be a kind of parallel action to Richard Wagner's famous festival theater in Bayreuth. What fascinates you today about Wagner's idea of the total work of art?

The reference to Wagner, on its most basic and most banal level, is a nostalgia trip: a longing for a time when music is at the center of the arts, of politics and philosophy and helped to construct and reinterpret the determining myths of humanity and progress. That is the music before the crisis – at least that is my imagination. The idea of the total work of art was formulated – as the readers know, of course – at the height of Wagner's revolutionary activity, more or less during the escape from Dresden, where he, Bakunin and the rest of the gang had built barricades and released dangerous pamphlets. In his text „The Art and the Revolution“, which he wrote a year after the appearance of Marx' „Communist Manifesto“, Wagner introduces the term total work of art and signals that there is a strong connection

between the idea of the total work of art and the political departure. But he also dreamed of a return to the Greek drama of Aeschylus, where art was closely linked to public life, religion and the state. As you can see, there is a lot here that is extremely fascinating: Of course I intend to do all of this.to do all of this.to do all of this.

With his „ Ring des Nibelungen “ Wagner wanted to create a great narrative of the world explanation. But haven't we learned in postmodern school that there are no big stories left? So what narrative does the Norwegian Opra work on?

As one of my many half-hearted and semi-secret PR campaigns, I organized the seminar „ The Return of the Great Narrative “, without an audience and without speakers. In fact, it consisted of only one title. But officially the narratives are back in my world. The truth comes in the form of fiction.

You have to explain that!

My longing for the great and sublime has a provincial background, namely the situation of contemporary music, about which I am so saddened – with its never-ending exploration of subtle timbre details, their minimal differentiations in the playing techniques and the completely meaningless gradation of gray sound masses. It is a paradise of pettiness – from Aeschylus as far away as you can imagine.

On a more political level, the narrative that there are no narratives has necessarily led us into a world where it is impossible to find an alternative to a „ neutral “, to present capitalistically organized society. Marx wrote – when it was still possible to dream – that communism was nothing more than the name for the process of abolishing the capitalist system. For me, that's the only political issue worthy of the opera format.

So: The uprising begins to paraphrase a famous turn by Heiner Müller, not as a walk, but as an opera evening?

By allowing the Norwegian Opra to deal with the greatest possible topics and to design art projects that span thirty years, and by shamelessly referring to the greatest earlier works of art, we put ourselves in a somewhat silly and tragic situation. The prospect of a supporting king like Ludwig II is bleak.

You bet on maximum self-sufficiency! The program for the Munich „ Ø “ trilogy 2018 states that the Norwegian Opra is the utopian attempt at absolute artistic freedom in order to gain complete control over all aspects of the production apparatus. How free are you now as an opera composer?

For me, the question of freedom is the core of art. Perhaps art exists above all as an exploration of freedom and as the opening of new opportunities for thinking and the sensual. But I can't give a definition of freedom, especially not in connection with a way of living or creating. I don't think it exists. We are always caught up in banal practices, the gaze of the other, the epigenetics of our mothers, the inevitable rhythms of sleep and food. My little attempt is to push the idea of freedom in art as far as possible. I screwed down the entire apparatus of opera production and designed a dictatorial method of compositional planning. Maybe I did that because I feel very easily unfree.

A kind of leitmotif in your work is the great aria of the „ postmodern swamp “, whose interpreters also feel unfree. It consists of the beautiful sentence: „ Here we sit in the postmodern swamp. “ How did the aria come about?

Thank you for the question of this great masterpiece! The aria actually appears in many of my works because the text seems to be of timeless quality.

Do you also sit in the postmodern swamp – or would you already call yourself a post-modern composer?

One of the great tasks of my life is the hard work of making a small contribution to overcoming the postmodern state of mind. It is not easy. Postmodernity is known to dissolve

like its evil twin brother, capital – all solids. The weak ambiguities and relativism of vulgar postmodernism do not cause me any enthusiasm.

Epistemology plays a major role in your works. In episode 13 of the „ Ø “ series, the Hegel cantata „ The truth is the whole “ is heard.

Oh yes, the famous Hegel cantata is written in the authentic Bach Reger Stravinsky Poulenc style, as a study in neoclassical counterpoint.

Theorist Alain Badiou has also found her way into your work. In her piano concerto „ Theory of the Subject “, pianist Ellen Ugelvik reads extensively in his work of the same name. In addition to your singing and composition studies in Oslo, have you also completed a philosophy course?

In philosophy, I am a 100% self-taught person, so I can always say that I misunderstand the philosophical concepts for artistic reasons. I am not sure whether my great joy in philosophy, which is constantly seeping into the works, is actually an artistically successful aspect of my work. I sometimes see it as a disease that I try to get rid of. It can get elitist, and it is annoying to be presented with references that you do not understand. But on the other hand, I think that philosophy is the perfect partner for opera. For me, both represent something of the same urge to go to the extreme: on the one hand to really think a thought to the end and on the other hand to extend sensitivity to its most pathetic forms of expression.

René Pollesch starts as the new director of the Berlin Volksbühne in autumn. Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller belong to his artistic team there. Will you be there again?

Yes, we are preparing for a monumental „ Peer Gynt “. As far as I know, it will be the opening production. On the eve, my large festive folk stage symphony „ A people, a stage “ for large orchestra and choir is to be premiered: a programmatic foray into five long movements through the glorious history of the house. It ends with a song of praise for the new artistic era, with the chorus „ New artistic dance! New director! “.

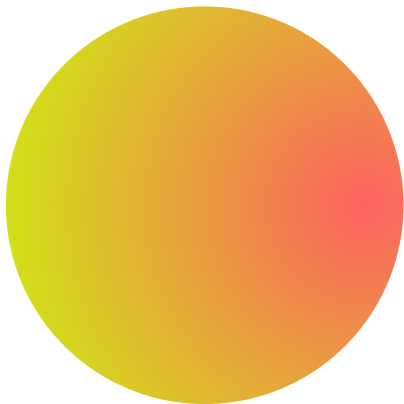
Would there have been a professional alternative for you?

No, I was always monomaniac. //

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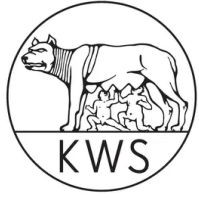
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